



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

FRANÇOIS VILLON.

When song newborn put off the old world's attire,
And felt its tune on her changed lips expire,
Writ foremost on the roll of them that came,
Fresh gift for service of the latter lyre,
Villon, our sad, bad, glad, mad brother's name.

IN a recent tribute to Rossini, whose memory is kindly kept by a few lovers of the classical in music, comment was made upon the inability to keep with us the memories of departed men of genius. To the lovers of the genuine poet this deplorable fact may serve as introduction, or rather as passport, to the shade of the long-dead François Villon, "our sad, bad, glad, mad brother's name." This happy refrain sympathetically expresses for us, in the present revival of mediæval and early modern lyrical poetry, the attitude of the lover of true poetry toward this warped vagrant Villon, whom Stevenson has labeled for all time as student, poet, house-breaker. Were it not that the mean is golden, we should hesitate before accepting this characterization by Stevenson; the one word "poet," however, lifts him up and sets him beyond the pale of callow wanton revelry which led his dare-devil associates unwillingly to Montfaucon, where Henri Cousin, who presided at those death feasts, willingly started them on their final journey, irreparable in its consequences and just in its deserts.

An apology is not necessary when in sympathetic endeavor we bring to one another a knowledge of the men whose thoughts and fancies have stirred our souls. Sad thoughts, indeed, it brings to the student of literary history to turn its pages from the beginning and see the names of great and noble men and women that have become mere page-flowers, doomed to starless night. Scholars are beginning to realize the debt that culture owes to this army of unknowns. One by one the literary world is startled by the visitation of a strange new light, all the brighter by the fact of its dormancy of several centuries. And so we welcome

with a feeling of shy joy an intimate acquaintance with those long-forgotten poets that touch the modern world with the freshness of their thought or the exquisite beauty of their poetic form.

Until recently Villon was but little known and seldom mentioned in English-speaking circles. John Payne's translation came out in 1892 through the unique Villon society; Swinburne and Lang have done into English, in their dainty way, some of Villon's ballade poetry, and that immortal essayist Robert Louis Stevenson has set him before us in an enticing garb. In France, however, Villon's poems had run through thirty-two editions up to 1854, and several have since appeared. His poetry has always touched responsive chords there, despite the vicissitudes that beset reputations in that country of changing loves. Their phrase "*plus ça change, plus ça reste*" is an incisive critique when applied to their love for Villon; for the abiding note in him is the pensive plaint welling from the underswell of melancholy that marks the French temperament except where it is outwardly saved by the sting of poignant satire.

Marot, Ronsard, Malherbe, Boileau, Hugo, Verlaine! what strange bedfellows! and yet Villon has been loved by them all. He is at once realist and idealist. What a burden of despair lurks in the hopeless cry of Fat Peg!

Je suis paillard, paillardise me suit.

Or again where the old hag, the sometime fair helm-maker, sings her swan song with such infinite pathos:

Que m'en reste-t-il? honte et péché!

Villon's inheritance was that of his race; his work is stamped with the formal beauty of the Latin and the racy, picturesque, rich rhythm of the Kelt. The ecstatic heart-throbs that speak from his lines show his soul in unison with the imperceptible drift of the spirit of the ages, ever demanding a singer out of time. He was satisfied at times to live outwardly the conventional and false life of his contemporaries and successors of the fifteenth century, but seldom did he betray himself in song. As from them, so we have from him an

occasional line marking the idle singer of an empty day; but into most of his work he breathed the spirit that has marked him as one of the "most sombre thinkers" in French verse. In his love poems he strikes notes that are in noble contrast with the indolent and complacent lilt of pastoral love poetry.

I have a tree, a graft of love,
That in my heart has taken root;
Sad are the buds and blooms thereof,
And bitter sorrow is its fruit;
Yet, since it was a tender shoot,
So greatly hath its shadow spread,
That underneath all joy is dead,
And all my pleasant days are flown,
Nor can I slay it, nor instead
Plant any tree, save this alone.

These lines have given Villon kinship with a number of the rarest poets of our age, despite the criticism of healthy sentiment. An American writer in a recent number of the *Chap-Book* has thus linked our poet: "The Poes and Villons, the urban highest types of genius, to which belong the Verlaines and the Baudelaires, invariably voice a supremely artificial conception of life and its aspirations. Their flowers are flowers of evil; their trees bear Sodom apples; their birds sing dolorous songs, and the very air they breathe has a burden of severe poison." This critic is right when he says that these men cannot be judged by rural standards. It is by these alone that one can understand his failure to see the sad beauty and eternal truth that wells from the poetry of men whose souls are on the rack. A man who is able to see in Villon something other than artistic evil need not necessarily consider himself an artist, but it seems to me that he views everything from a higher plane if he can include himself with those who see, as Stevenson says, beautiful and human traits in him.

Poor Villon! The stars must have been in unhappy conjunction at the time of his birth. Those were bitter times for Paris and for France in 1431 *Anno Domini*. The country was ravaged by war and torn by dissensions. Henry V. of England had taken Calais, Rouen, and had trodden in the

dust at Agincourt the lilies of France. With a mad king and his faithless wife to direct the ship of state, the blue-blooded Burgundians and white-scarfed Armagnacs waged strife for regency and changed the color of peace and purity for that of carnage. Bold robber barons held their sway in the neighborhood and purged Paris at will. Famine was abroad in the land and snapping wolves came down into the streets of Paris to help make habitable the abode of our future poet. The Council of Constance in 1415 had dissolved the great schism with its rival papal sees of Rome and Avignon, but the seeds sown by that ecclesiastical war had taken deep root in the consciousness of the French nation, and at the dawn of the sixteenth century brought to light Rabelais. The domestic disorders of the clergy gave ample opportunity for lampoon and invective. The ribaldry and rottenness which obtained throughout that order in France make Friar Tuck of Robin Hood fame seem a mere novice in debauchery. Literature gave some of its weapons for the attack of these abuses, at first in jest and play and then in solemn earnest, and we have John Calvin and his famous "Institution of the Christian Religion," which came out at Basle. The halls of learning had opened wide their doors to sin and vice and served as cloak to many a trespasser of even the lax laws of that time. Secret societies were engendered and fostered within their walls, and side by side with such fraternities as the Clercs de la Basoche and the Enfants sans Souci, guilds for the maintenance and development of early dramatic forms, there existed bands of sneak-thieves and cutthroats, cousins german of Dickens' Birds of Prey. It was very hard for justice to get at these fellows; as clerics they had certain immunities and could be tried only in bishops' courts, although appeal might be made to Parliament under the signature of the king. It was, however, on the whole, a safe way to lead a precarious life, paradoxical as this may seem, and many a university career was shortened by its allurements and temptations. This was true, not only of the Sorbonne, but of all Western centres of learning. Even at England's Oxford Green depicts vividly for us a similar state. "At nightfall,"

he says, "roysterer and reveler roam with torches through the narrow lanes, defying bailiffs and cutting down burghers at their doors. Now a mob of clerks plunges into the Jewry and wipes off the memory of bills and bonds by sacking a Hebrew house or two. Now a tavern row between scholars and townsmen widens into a general broil and the academical bell of St. Mary's vies with the town bell of St. Martin's in clanging to arms. Every phase of ecclesiastical controversy or political strife is preluded by some fierce outbreak in this turbulent, surging mob. When England groans at the exactions of the papacy, the students besiege a legate in the abbot's house at Osney. A murderous town-and-gown row precedes the opening of the Barons' War." In the "Song of the Open Road" we have a very realistic picture of the life led by these worldly scholastics. Victor Hugo has made this type immortal as Jehan Frolo in his masterly romance of "Notre Dame de Paris." It is a type common to the French people, and we catch its note, but under different conditions, from poor Gavroche, singing his way to death to the refrain of *je n'ai qu'un Dieu, qu'un roi, qu'un liard, qu'une botte*.

Villon's soul was not nursed in a lap of luxury. His father was poor and uneducated; his mother increased this stock in trade with piety. It was this latter trait, however, that saved Villon from carrying his heady and sensual penchants to their ultimate result. The deep religious nature of the man is shown in the touching ballade made at the request of his mother. A charm of sweet and humble piety breathes in the following lines:

Lady of Heaven, Regent of the earth,
 Empress of all the infernal marshes fell,
 Receive me, Thy poor Christian, 'spite my dearth,
 In the fair midst of Thine elect to dwell:
 Albeit my lack of grace I know full well;
 For that Thy grace, my Lady and my Queen,
 Aboundeth more than all my misdeemean,
 Withouten which no soul of all that sigh
 May merit Heaven. 'Tis sooth I say, for e'en
 In this belief I will to live and die.

And then again, he alone of all his contemporaries seemed to read the pure and holy beauty in the life of that divinely commissioned Maid through whom superstitious France returned a kingdom to an apathetic king. His poems show us at times this pious strain in such a startling and unfamiliar way that we feel ourselves in the presence of a great soul, damned by the social evils of this dark time. It is as though we heard in the lonely recesses of some deep-vaulted cathedral a voice of admonition to the merrymakers in holiday garb as they wend their triumphal procession down the brightly lighted aisles "piped to the ditties of no tone."

Our knowledge of Villon's life is meagre. We are indebted almost wholly to his Testaments, a favorite form of literary expression in the late mediæval period; literary diaries in which the poet bequeathed to posterity his real and imagined possessions, wherein the quaint song medley burst forth from under the mass of biographical and historical data. Whether we judge these poems from form or context, Villon remains for us a prince of song. He was well acquainted with the structural side of poetry, and no one has succeeded better with the recurrent rhyme and refrain of the ballade. Saintsbury speaks of these testaments as satires on friend and foe, studded with ballades and rondeaux, so full of sad and beautiful poetry that even those who care for no other mediæval work admit their charm. Villon's use of the ballade and rondeau shows his mastery of the artificial forms of poetry, although he never cared to dally with the rondel and triolet which we find so exquisitely handled by his noble contemporary, the indolent, song-loving Charles d'Orleans, whose death is conceived by Stevenson, in one of his striking phrases, as a whiff of pungent prose stopping the issue of melodious rondels to the end of time.

From these testaments we see Villon as a harum-scarum university student in 1448, graduating as Bachelor in 1451, and Master in 1452. It was his good fortune to become about this time the ward of the Chaplain Saint Benoit, whose little chapel of Porte Rouge nestled but a short distance from the Sorbonne, where Villon is supposed to have received

his classical training. In the spring of 1455 Villon became involved in a quarrel with the good priest Philippe Sermaise. Immediate flight saved him; but, failing to appear on summons, he was banished for six months from Paris, the adored city, where with his companions Montigny, Colin de Cayeux and the priest Dom Nicolas he held high carnival in the heyday of youth. Although Villon was exonerated from blame by the dying priest, his shuddering soul must have been on the rack during those months of exile. On his return we hear of no mad pranks, but the greater part of the "Small Testament" breathes the spirit of gratitude, love, and repose. Stevenson would have us be wary of this interregnum period. "He is the man of genius with the moleskin cap," he says. What a telling phrase! and yet we must be wary of Stevenson here, for we could read murder into the heart of any man if we would but magnify his suggestions and errings. Villon did not long greet the world, however, with his monastic *pax vobiscum*, and he had to flee Paris again; this time because of a quarrel into which he was led by a faithless mistress, one Catherine Vaucelles, a character which, in the Villon drama that Mr. Otis Skinner had upon the stage recently, is very strongly drawn, but travesties historic truth. During Villon's absence from Paris his name is coupled with some atrocities committed by his fellows. Montigny and Colin de Cayeux are saved from the perils of life by Henri Cousin, who swings them high to the tune of the winds. Villon was so near to this that his poetic insight realized in a marvelous way the sufferings of a gibbeted soul. With the haunting memories of the "Ballade aux Pendus" in their veins we do not marvel at the exquisitely pointed morbid analysis of Chénier, Balzac, or d'Annunzio. Written in prison by Villon just before his expected death, this ballade stands unique perhaps in literature:

Prince Jesus, over all empowered,
 Let us not fall into the Place of Dread,
 But all our reckoning with the Fiend efface,
 Folk, mock us not that are forespent and dead:
 The rather pray, God grant us of his grace!

How different from "La Jeune Captive" of André Chénier, wherein the sensuous Franco-Greek anticipates his own reception by Madame Guillotine!

Je ne suis qu'au printemps, je veux voir la moisson;
 Et comme le soleil, de saison en saison,
 Je veux achever mon année.
 Brillante sur ma tige, et l'honneur du jardin,
 Je n'ai vu luire encore que les feux du matin;
 Je veux achever ma journée.
 O mort! tu peux attendre: éloigne, éloigne-toi;
 Va consoler les cœurs que la honte, l'effroi,
 Le pâle désespoir dévore.
 Pour moi Palès encore a des asiles verts;
 Le monde, des plaisirs; les Muses, des concerts;
 Je ne veux pas mourir encore.

There is no Titanic despair in these lines however; simply the piteous wailing of a soul devoted to the quest of beauty. Under similar conditions our own Keats might have pleaded for the staying of the cruel and bitter knife, and Gretchen, the Goethian embodiment of feminine grace and beauty, makes our soul shiver with similar effect:

Erbarme dich und lass mich leben!
 Ist's morgen früh nicht zeitig genug?
 Bin ich doch noch so jung, so jung!
 Und soll schon sterben!

Nor again does Sir Walter Raleigh, who recalls Villon through his restless fervor and the rare strength and sweetness of his song, sigh the lament of dull despair in his lyric expiration at the throne of the English Rabenstein.

Villon's death sentence was commuted to one of banishment, and he went to Vienne, a Bourbon town in the Rhone valley. Charles d'Orleans, charmed by the simple and sweet note of Villon, exerted himself in his behalf and had him transported to his own fairyland, where flowers, the dulcet note of birds, and redolent zephyrs must have acted like a love potion on the poor poet. Here he lived on his wits and took part in the celebrated rhyming tournaments of this prince. Villon's debt to Charles d'Orleans wells out in waves of song. In the lines addressed to the newborn princess we feel again the true ring of gratitude, the soul

of piety which none but the sacrilegious scoffer would think of comparing with the penny-a-line production of a modern poet-laureate.

O honored birth sent here below from heaven;
Worthy offshoot of the noble lily;
Most precious gift of Jesus;
Mary, most precious name,
Fount of pity, source of grace,
The happy consolation of mine eyes,
Who dost build and confirm my peace,
The peace, that is, of the rich,
The substance of the poor,
The hiding place of felons and wretches.

Dates and dungeons seem to link themselves naturally in the life of Villon. In the summer of 1461 we hear of Master François as having taken up his abode, on orders of the Bishop of Meun, at the bottom of a pit to which he had been lowered by a tub. Villon did not accept the situation with the cynicism of Diogenes; but we cannot blame him, for he was even robbed of the sunlight which was so precious to the latter. He was liberated from his confinement on the accession of King Louis XI., and immediately returned to Paris, where he soon after wrote the "Large Testament," the last chapter in his life.

It is impossible to read Villon outside the pale of his period and his race. In him we see the delicate blend of the classic and the Gallic; of exquisite æsthetic instinct, but in touch with the popular poetry. Modern literatures are the result of so much intermingling and copying that it is difficult to call any one kind of thought or feeling the product of a certain place or time. Pouchekin, the demagogue of Russian verse, reminds us of Villon in the above characteristics. We catch glimpses of Villon in many an English and American poet; Burns, Byron, Hood, Poe, Riley have in them a certain strain of our mad poet, but there is a something in Villon that is not found outside the man and his age. In the very midst of his dare-devil deeds, his jolly, riotous life, there was a silent voice, a consciousness of the half-pagan vanity of it all. This is the note that fully ex-

plains the immediate and universal charm of Villon and the "Esprit Gaulois." This *esprit naïf et malin* has been daintily yet forcibly expressed by Andrew Lang in his sonnet addressed to Villon.

List, all that love light mirth, light tears, and all
 That know the heart of shameful loves, or pure;
 That know delights depart, desires endure,
 A fevered tribe of ghosts funereal,
 Widowed of dead delights gone out of call;
 List, all that deem the glory of the rose
 Is brief as last year's suns or last year's snows
 The new suns melt from off the sundial.

All this your master Villon knew and sung;
 Despised delights, and faint fore done desire;
 And shame a deathless worm of quenchless fire;
 And laughter from the heart's last sorrow wrung.
 When half repentance but makes evil whole,
 And prayer that cannot help wears out the soul.

Again, subtle workings of this suggestive French temperament are easily seen in Verlaine's "Moonlight" and recall similar situations in Villon's "Clairs de lune."

Your soul is as a moonlit landscape fair,
 Peopled with maskers delicate and dim,
 That play on lutes and dance and have an air
 Of being sad in their fantastic trim
 The while they celebrate in minor strain
 Triumphant love, effective enterprise,
 They have an air of knowing all in vain.

That is the note of Hugo and especially of Daudet, and is the wine which every genuine Frenchman has drunk from the ardent breast of mother earth. This startling antithesis has given poignant and terrible effects in their literature. Stevenson has very naïvely expressed it: "to enhance pity with ridicule, like a man cutting capers to a funeral march." This is no flippant statement, but contains in itself the key to the French temperament and was elaborated by the Romantic school of the present century into a scheme of art that was dominant for a quarter of a century, Victor Hugo's grotesque in art finds its daily exemplification in the Irish wake and the eerie music of such a fantasy as the funeral march of

the Marionettes. From the theme of disappointed love of the French chanson there grew that subtle satire which the sanctity of neither Church nor State might stay, or which simmered down to petulant frettings or morbid melancholy. Even before Villon there are traces of this note of despair in the love poems of the Trouvères; but there is not yet the deep despondency begotten by the feeling of the transitoriness of life and the horrors of death, so common to the late Middle Ages. What is called the personal note in lyric poetry is at times suggested by poor Colin de Musset, the noble Thibaut, Count of Champagne, and Rutebeuf, the wandering minstrel. Rutebeuf's regret for the death of chivalry is perhaps a selfish cry; but if we place our ear to the poem of Thibaut with its wail, "Morts sont Ogier et Charlemagne," we hear the low passionate beat that afterwards rends Villon's heart, glimpses of whose secret workings we can catch in those flashes of melancholy that speak of the ever-recurring regret for "pleasures past and beauties blast."

Villon is a satirist of no mean ability. Stevenson pays him a higher tribute in this field than in any other. For him he is inseparably linked with Rabelais. But, although the free-thinking spirit of the French abounds in Villon, there is a wide margin between his disenchantment and the laughing derision of Rabelais.

There was no established law and but few established traditions that could appeal to bold spirits following the bent of their fancies and linked by but one common bond, independence and originality. Villon suffered in body and soul the miseries of his time. When one is ragged and hungry, it is beyond mortal power, even in an age of hope, to refrain from expressing the depression that weighs upon the soul, whence belief and good cheer have fled. Villon loved good cheer and the whole ragged army of Bohemia of which he sings are passionately fond of it and take it wherever they can find it. Pierre Gringoire, the wandering poet, enthroned as the king of the thieves, enables us to appreciate Villon's attitude and position among the class of lawless vagabonds. Caught in the act, on the outskirts of life, he was

compelled to fight his way in the shadows. If we were to paint a picture of Villon, dark grays and dull outlines would best fit our purpose. Villon had the *bonne camaraderie* of the French and fiddled for the knaves in a seemingly happy way; with an occasional fling at those of higher station who deprived him of the comforts of life; under all, however, the deep, dark current of passion and melancholy. The weird and plaintive cry *qui sait où s'en vont les roses* ushers in the "Lesson to the Good-for-Naughts."

Fair sons you're wasting, ere you're old,
The fairest rose to you that fell.

And in the ballade of "Good Doctrine" the refrain points the slipping loss:

Rhyme, rail, wrestle, and cymbals play;
Flute and fool it in mummer's shows:
Along with the strolling players stray
From town to city, without repose;
Act mysteries, farces, imbroglios:
Win money at gleek or a lucky hit
At the pins; like water away it flows;
Taverns and wenches every whit.

It has been said that only those who have immortal hope in their hearts and affirm it can look for immortal life in their books. With Villon this must read immortal sadness. Browning says, "The soul doubtless is immortal—where a soul can be discerned." Our poet had a good deal of what is called soul-substance, in rare, delicate shadings.

The death's head had a charm for Villon that he could not shake off. No lover could have been more devoted, but the humors of his wooing had often the fickleness of his temperament. Every swift and subtle change of mood in the irony of life seemed to attract him irresistibly. (If he had been a painter, the world would have had a greater Holbein.) The quaint humor of the Scot or the love of mystic beauty he did not possess; otherwise Tam o'Shanter or Lenora would have been surpassed by this lover of the churchyard dust. In the "Fragment on Death" Villon's art by a suggestion of rare poetic quality transcends the realism of

death and gives us something more than a brutal description:

O woman's body, found so tender,
Smooth, sweet, so precious in men's eyes,
Must thou too bear such count to render?
Yes; or pass quick into the skies.

In those ballades where the Red Masque stalks his way mid the voluptuous warmth and passionate beauty of the pageantry of departed lords and ladies Villon is the master. Their exquisite grace and charm have seldom been surpassed. Poets of every time and clime have essayed to garb the canker and the worm in warm, glowing phrase and melodious verse, but few have equaled Villon in his startling, picturesque lines. Shirley has several poems with this motive, but they are written in a somewhat didactic manner which dispels the very charm that the subject should weave. When Hood cries,

'tis little joy
To know I'm farther off from heaven
Than when I was a boy,

we are thrilled with the flash of pathos that comes to us in this simple refrain. In Burns alone, of all our English poets, however, we find the indescribable grace of Villon when dealing with *memento mori*. How bleak and forlorn is the view that strikes the reader in the last strophe of "Lines to a Mouse!"

Still thou art blessed compared with me;
The present only toucheth thee:
But, och! I backward cast my e'e
On prospects drear!
An' forward tho' I cannot see,
I guess an' fear!

Browning says of Galuppi:

Butterflies may dread extinction—
You'll not die, it cannot be!

And so we feel for Villon. His soul was not ephemeral. Touched by the pathos of temporal decay, he saw the dregs of life at the bottom of every deep-red glass. The sting of creation was in his heart, but it did not embitter him. He

may not have borne his cross with the humility of Burns, but nowhere in his poems do we find Byronic discontent. We nowhere catch the Titanic despair of a Prometheus, the struggle of an individual who feels in himself the power of opposition, but is damned by superior decree to suffer the miseries of his wantonness. What is called the Faust legend in literature, the supremacy of the individual, received its highest expression in Goethe. In Villon we have seen this spirit of modern literature emerging from the chrysalis of classicism, but the individual is not yet strong enough to stand for the mission with which it is born. His weird refrains are the expression of the feeling that the individual was for naught in the face of the evil doings of a wanton age; and he lays himself down at last, a forespent soul, but one in whom we see the promise of a brighter dawn.

G. L. SWIGGETT.

Purdue University.